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FM AMEMBASSY BISHKEK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1584
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHPG/AMEMBASSY PRAGUE 0073
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2777
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3168
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2554
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO BRUSSELS BE
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 BISHKEK 001222

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND SCA/PPD

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SUBJECT: KYRGYZ TV PULLS RFE/RL OFF THE AIR, AVOIDS EMBASSY

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11. (SBU) Summary: Kyrgyz National Television and Radio Company (KTR) suspended broadcasting of RFE/RL radio and television programming on October 8, ostensibly due to non-payment by the International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB). However, IBB has since confirmed that its electronic funds transfer reached KTR. KTR Director Melis Eshimkanov has been "too busy" to meet with the Embassy to discuss the issue, but he told the press December 5 that he ordered the suspension of RFE/RL programming on contractual grounds. Despite KTR's actions, RFE/RL's Kyrgyz-language Radio Azattyk programming continues to be broadcast on private FM station in parts of Kyrgyzstan, including in Bishkek. End Summary.

KTR SUSPENDS RFE/RL PROGRAMMING

12. (SBU) On October 8, the Kyrgyz National Television and Radio Company (KTR) stopped transmitting RFE/RL's Kyrgyz0-language Radio Azattyk programming, as well as Azattyk TV. (Note: Radio Azattyk continues to be broadcast through private FM radio stations. See paragraph 6, below. End Note.) Coincidentally, KTR pulled the plug when Azattyk was advertising a special program on the results of Kyrgyzstan's October 5 local elections. KTR claimed that RFE/RL and IBB had not made payments required under their broadcasting agreement. For several months preceding KTR's move to cut off RFE/RL programming, IBB attempted to transfer payment electronically but was told by KTR that the money did not come through. KTR provided incorrect bank account information to IBB five times, and five times IBB unsuccessfully attempted to transfer payment. In October, IBB was finally able to confirm that KTR had received the money. Nevertheless, KTR pulled RFE/RL programming off the air claiming non-payment.

ESHIMKANOV "TOO BUSY" TO MEET WITH EMBASSY

13. (SBU) Embassy has tried repeatedly to meet with KTR Director Melis Eshimkanov to discuss the suspension of RFE/RL programming.

Most recently, Eshimkanov's deputy told us that Eshimkanov is "too busy" planning KTR's fiftieth anniversary gala and asked us to call back on December 11.

¶4. (SBU) Eshimkanov is also busy with challenges from KTR staff. In late November, several leading KTR reporters and managers gave a press conference and interviews accusing Eshimkanov of bad management and embezzlement. Over 300 KTR employees submitted a petition on November 26, in which they stated that Eshimkanov "contravened human and management norms and aggravated the social situation in KTR to an unbearable point." On December 3, a group that included several KTR TV stars erected a yurt in a local park and began a hunger strike. The yurt was quickly dismantled by the militia, but protestors are planning another anti-Eshimkanov protest. Assol Moldokmatova, local celebrity and protest leader, accused Eshimkanov of sexual harassment. Eshimkanov has not publicly reacted to the protests and accusations. He has said he is too busy with KTR's 50-year anniversary gala.

BBC HOPES TO BE BACK ON AIR SOON

¶5. (SBU) On December 5, Eshimkanov publicly announced the suspension of the BBC's local service, also citing contractual grounds. The BBC has responded by sending a delegation from London, which arrived in Bishkek December 9. Despite Eshimkanov's busy schedule, he has agreed to meet with the delegation on December 10. He has also reportedly promised to put the BBC back on the air on December 10.

SOME RFE/RL PROGRAMMING UNAFFECTED

¶6. (SBU) While KTR cut off RFE/RL'S Kyrgyz-language services, Radio Azattyk and Azattyk TV, Radio Azattyk continues to be available

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through private FM stations: Radio Almaz and Parliament (Bishkek), Radio Most (Talas), Radio LW (Karakol), Radio Almaz-Naryn, and Radio Salam (Batken). It is also available online and through satellites (HotBird-8 and AsiaSat 3). From time-to-time, Azattyk has been unavailable or been broadcast with a weak signal, but the Director of Radio Almaz explained that those were simply technical problems.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: Eshimkanov has declined to meet with the Embassy to discuss the suspension of RFE/RL programming, and his office would not confirm a meeting when RFE/RL proposed to send a delegation from Prague. We have raised concerns about the suspension with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and we will continue to raise this with other members of the government. While Radio Azattyk is still available in parts of Kyrgyzstan, re-broadcasting on KTR gave nationwide coverage for Azattyk programming.

LITZENBERGER